

Reframing Indigeneity:  
Community Participation to Inform the Development of an Indigenous Identity Measure

by

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## Abstract

Much of the research done on, rather than with, Indigenous peoples has led to the misinterpretation of Indigenous identity by mainstream society and academic researchers. Image-makers of early Canadian history put forth misinformation about the “Imaginary Indian,” which set the basis for how many Canadians and those in academia still view Canada’s national history (Cronin, 2003; Francis, 1992).

This research sought to understand how Indigenous peoples on the Laurentian University campus in Sudbury, Ontario defined their own Indigeneity. It is hoped that the results of this thesis will inform the development of an Indigenous Identity Measure (IIM) as well as reframe conceptions of Indigenous identities from the viewpoint of Indigenous participants. I employed Sharing Circles as a community participatory method, with an integrated approach to data analysis (Bradley, Curry & Devers, 2007; Nabigon, Hagey, Webster & MacKay, 1999). The purpose of choosing relevant Indigenous methods was to privilege the Indigenous perspective.

The Sharing Circles effectively demonstrated the diversity and complexity of how the participants understood and expressed their Indigenous identity. Culture, Colonization and Self-determining identity, were vital themes to help understanding Indigeneity.

Lastly, by asserting self-determined Indigenous identities and by supporting decolonizing methodologies, this research can serve as a template to reframe conceptions of Indigenous identity in the hope that this information might be useful for Indigenous persons, administrators, researchers and professors on a university campus.

**Keywords:** *Indigeneity; Indigenous identity; Indigenous culture; colonization; Indigenous reclamation; community participatory research; Sharing Circles; decolonizing methodologies; Indigenous methodologies; Integrated approach to data analysis*

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

Research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many Indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. (Smith, 1999, p. 1)

Indigenous peoples' experiences with research have included theft of intellectual property, physical and spiritual destruction, and decimation of culture and identity by the academic community (Smith, 1999). Much of the research done on, rather than with, Indigenous peoples has led to the misinterpretation of identity and the propagation of racial stereotypes by mainstream society and academic researchers (Cote-Meek 2014; Smith 1999). Image-makers of early Canadian history would propagate misinformation with constructions like "the Imaginary Indian" or "the Noble Savage" which set the basis for how many citizens still view Canada's national history (Francis, 1992, p.15). One example can be found in Edward Curtis' photographic depiction of primitive, savage, yet sometimes romanticized peoples (Glass, 2009). Most constructions of this type have contributed to racialized assumptions about who Indigenous peoples are and how they identify (Francis, 1992). Moreover these ill-informed fabrications have been encouraged and propagated through outlets of research and academia (Cote-Meek, 2014; Glass, 2009; Godlewska, Moore & Bednasek, 2010; Smith, 1999). As a process, research has impacted many elements of Indigenous existence, including the misrepresentation of culture, identity, and lived experiences (Smith, 1999; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).



The context of this research acknowledges academic predispositions of ascribing identity to Indigenous First Peoples such as was done by many anthropologists, ethnologists, and other colonizers of knowledge (Smith, 1999). For example, most identity measures are informed by a non-Indigenous theoretical framework, and can encourage oversimplification of cultural identity (Kulis, Wagaman, Tso & Brown, 2013; Reynolds, Quevillon & Boyed, 2006; 2013). Identity measures informed by institutional representations can emphasize false assumptions and limit the assessment and expression of Indigeneity.

This research seeks to understand how Indigenous peoples view, define and express their own sense of identity. It is the researcher's hope that with the integration of community participation, the information gathered will later assist with the development of a reliable Indigenous Identity Measure (IIM) that is regional and contextual.

### **Positioning Myself**

It is vital to position myself, my values, and my background relative to this research, as it is specifically grounded in matters of identity. I, like many others, have an ever-changing sense of identity, moulded according to my surroundings at work, at school, and at home. I am most culturally grounded in my Franco-Ontarian identity, which I have lived through my language, culture and relationship to society. I have recently become aware of my Métis ancestry, and how elements of that identity were transmitted to me unknowingly. For example, teachings on nature, health, family, community, respect, reciprocity and many others were transmitted to me. My maternal grandmother, who was undoubtedly more grounded in her Indigenous roots than me,

demonstrated expertise in midwifery and agricultural skills. It is through her that I see myself exploring elements of my Indigenous identity.

My cultural identity is important to me as it creates a sense of belonging within a culture, with my family, friends and my community. My identity is also what I make from it. For example, I deeply perceive my identity as that of a system-shaker and advocate for self-identification. I want to challenge people's views of identity and empower them to alter their preconceptions of marginalized peoples. Most of all, I wish to help restore people's right to define themselves without stigma.

### **Terminology**

Language can be a powerful tool when describing concepts such as identity (Corntassel & Hopkins Primeau, 1998; Cote-Meek, 2014). In the context of this research, the terms Indigenous, Indigenous peoples and First Peoples are used as defining terms to include all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada. The researcher acknowledges Indigenous peoples as heterogeneous and recognizes that there are an infinite number of articulations of identity (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). The intention is to encourage all Indigenous peoples to relate to the research, and to support participants in defining their own identity, whether it is Anishinaabe, Mushkegowuk, Métis or any other community. It is important to note that if my participants use terminology such as Aboriginal, Native, American-Indian and other terms to describe their stories, I will use their terminology in their respective quotes. However, for this research I will be using the inclusive term "Indigenous" throughout this document.

There are an infinite number of manifestations of Indigeneity, as defined by each individual anywhere on the spectrum from traditionalist to modernist (Guenther, 2006).

For this thesis, I have chosen to use the term Indigeneity to mean the self-determined expression of one's individual or communal Indigenous identity (Merlan, 2009). This definition fits within the scope of my research aim that is to find out what conceptions of Indigenous identity are meaningful to a certain group of Indigenous persons who work and or study at a University.

### **Purpose of Research**

The primary purpose of this research was to understand how members of Indigenous peoples on the Laurentian University campus in Sudbury, Ontario defined their Indigeneity. I used community participatory methods to gather information on how individuals conceptualized their Indigeneity. A decolonizing methodology and worldview was used to frame this thesis. Therefore, this thesis begins with the Indigenous perspective, rather than allowing academic theory to be superimposed on Indigenous identities. It was hoped that the research would contribute to understanding the impact and reach of identity in a wide range of disciplines such as education, health, and justice systems.

### **Rationale**

Understanding Indigeneity from an Indigenous perspective is vital to counter the long-standing cultural misrepresentation and constructed identity of Indigenous peoples on the part of mainstream society, including government and academia. Knowing this, it is important to understand instruments similar to the Indigenous Identity Measure (IIM), which were traditionally conceived with little input from Indigenous peoples themselves (Reynolds et al., 2006). Although there has been vast improvement in terms of community participation in research, many measures have been developed from a

western-based academic framework that often neglects community participation, or privileges knowledge from elite members of a community (Reynolds et al., 2006; Smith, 1999). In addition, there is a clear lack of identity instruments that have been developed specifically for the Indigenous Peoples in Canada and in Northern Ontario where the project took place. The following sections will outline the purpose of identity instruments and why employing community participation from key informants are integral to re-conceptualizing identities that have been marginalized by mainstream society.

### **Indigenous Identity Measure (IIM)**

An IIM is a psychometric instrument used to assess a person's level of knowledge of Indigenous culture, language, history, and social context (Reynolds et al., 2006; 2013; Sevig, Highlen & Adams 2000). The aim of this instrument is to establish a correlation between levels of knowledge about Indigeneity and bias against Indigenous peoples. As stated by Pedersen and Barlow (2008), the greater the base of knowledge an individual has about the Indigenous context, the less likely they are to have prejudice or bias against that group. The reason I am referring to the IIM is to provide the reader and myself with a starting context that is certain biases and prejudices exist, and are incorrectly used when examining Indigenous identities. Secondly, the purpose for choosing the IIM as an instrument is to identify how it could be used for a variety of other positive tasks, such as assessing student and teacher knowledge based on curriculum materials; evaluating health service delivery; measuring the Canadian public's knowledge of Indigenous peoples, and others.

The following chapters will outline the literature review, methodology, and findings of the research project. Chapter 2 will describe and review the existing literature

in the key areas of academic representation, Indigenous identities, and community participation. Chapter 3 will outline the theoretical framework and method used to undertake the project, as well as key assumptions and limitations. This section explains the research method employed in terms of sampling, data collection, and ethics. Finally, Chapter 4 lays out the analysis process, research findings, discussion and conclusion. This section will give a detailed explanation of the data analysis process, followed by the key themes that arose from the data, and finally a discussion of the outcomes of the research.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

Reviewing the existing literature on academic portrayal and misrepresentation of Indigeneity, self-determined Indigenous identity, and community participation was vital to understanding the range of perspectives about how Indigenous identities have been and are still being conceptualized today. These key areas of literature research were narrowed once the thesis questions were identified. Scholarly articles were collected from a variety of online sources, journals, quarterlies, and reviews. The literature concerned with academic representations was not restricted by publication date, as it is important to understand depictions of Indigenous peoples over time. However in the case of Indigenous identity and community participation, the researcher sought to focus the literature review on more recent articles from the last decade. The literature informing the latter two topics was mostly Canadian in context, attempting to grasp regional distinctiveness; however, some resources from Australia and the United States were also used to give a complete picture.

First, the literature reviewed academic representations of Indigenous identity by examining colonization through structural outlets to understand how dated and racialized constructions have been employed by academia. Moreover, it is important to understand how these constructions were used to inform the development of prior identity measures such as the *Cultural Activity Measure* and *Cultural Values and Beliefs Scale among Dakota/Nakota/Lakota people* (Lewicka, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2006). These particular instruments have typically been informed by a theoretical and generalized understanding of Indigenous identity rather than community participatory models. Additionally, it is

essential to note the shortage of locally based identity measures in Canada and more specifically in Ontario with regard to the Indigenous First Peoples.

Secondly, it was crucial to understand how individuals and communities have traditionally and contemporarily expressed their own sense of Indigenous identity. Colonization as a mechanism needs to be acknowledged as playing a major role in inhibiting the identity formation of Indigenous identities (Alfred & Corntassel 2005; Usborne & Taylor 2009). However, self-identification as an act of self-determination was of greater importance to the focus of this investigation.

Finally, within a decolonizing framework, it is important to understand the literature around Indigenous methodologies, culturally supportive and appropriate Indigenous methods, and lastly, the impact of having communities inform and participate in research (Nabigon et al., 1999; Restoule 2006; Lavallée, 2009;). For the purposes of this research, community participation was chosen as a means of gathering information by employing Sharing Circles to provide a culturally safe, respectful and trustworthy context for participants to share their stories of Indigeneity (Nabigon et al., 1999; Stevenson, 1999). Additionally, Indigenous methodology and methods were most helpful in maintaining respectful relationships with communities and contributing to an ethical research process (Smith, 1999).

### **Academic Representation**

Concepts surrounding the construction of Indigenous identity have historically been structured by non-Indigenous views and have resulted in distortion, perversion, and omission of the historical context (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Cote-Meek, 2014; de

Leeuw, Greenwood & Cameron, 2010; Glass, 2009; Godlewska et al., 2010; Salem-Wiseman, 1996; Smith, 1999). Imaginary caricatures and representations by individuals such as ethnographer and photographer Edward Curtis have fed illusory societal perceptions of the constructed Indian (Francis 1992; Glass, 2009). Although some researchers may have been well-intentioned, scholarly imagery created by early photographers, ethnographers, and anthropologists have been viewed through either a romanticized lens or a deviant frame of the Eurocentric worldview (Alfred & Cornassel, 2005; de Leeuw et al., 2010). Francis (1992) gives the example of Paul Kane, a famous nineteenth-century painter who knew very little of Indigenous languages, culture, and customs, but was revered for his status as an “artistic interpreter.” As he states, historical text books are littered with his representations – and “for most of us, the Indian of the nineteenth-century Canada is Paul Kane’s Indian.” (Francis, 1999, p 16)

Racialized constructions such as these can be seen through the Government of Canada’s interventionist policies concerning education of Indigenous peoples (Cunneen, 2011; de Leeuw et al., 2010; Glass, 2009). Solving the “Indian Problem” through the use of residential schooling is only one of the many ways in which the state’s assimilationist agenda impacted how Indigenous peoples and the rest of the country would come to understand and perceive Indigenous identity (de Leeuw et al., 2010; Salem-Wiseman, 1996; TRCC, 2015).

More recently, specifically examining the Ontario school curriculum, Godlewska et al. (2010) noted substantial omissions of Indigenous history and worldviews, in addition to a disproportionate or unbalanced portrayal of the Canadian story. These same authors put forward the critique that much of the Indigenous content in the classroom is



not compulsory and is left to the discretion of the teacher. Pedersen and Barlow (2008) substantiated that lack of Indigenous content is linked to higher levels of expressed prejudice and intolerance targeting First Peoples, and that ongoing comprehensive education could diminish levels of bias. Interestingly, it was noted that without ongoing immersion in the cultural context, individuals reverted to their original levels of bias, which leads the researcher to believe there are greater schematic forces influencing academia's perspectives on Indigenous peoples (Lloyd & Boyd, 2014; Pedersen & Barlow, 2008). Alfred and Cornthassel (2005) supported by Bernard Nietschmann (1995) elaborates on state imposed identities:

Imposed conceptions of supposedly Indigenous identity [...] read not as moves towards justice and positive integration but as indicators of an ongoing colonial assault on their existence, and signs of the fact that they remain, as in earlier colonial eras, occupied peoples who have been dispossessed and disempowered in their own homeland. (Alfred & Cornthassel, 2005; p. 598).

As mentioned earlier, colonialism continues to reinforce inaccurate perceptions of Indigenous identity, specifically through the use of education and scholarly research institutions (de Leeuw et al., 2010; Godlewska et al., 2010). As stated by Cote-Meek (2014), Indigenous peoples “find themselves contending with racialized constructions [...] that are perpetuated and held in place by very strong and compelling forces” (p. 140). Often these constructions are supported by misinformed pedagogy in the education system and are lacking in terms of representation. Misinformed education is difficult to address since the educational systems remain entrenched in a dominant colonial discourse, which is made apparent by the absence of adequate identity measures (Kulis et al., 2013; Lewicka, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2006; 2013).

When applied to psychometric instruments these misrepresentations and generalizations may lead to measures that do not necessarily reflect the diversity and complexity of Indigenous culture, beliefs, values, and understandings of identity (Reynolds et al., 2006; 2013). In other cases, elements of culture such as ceremony are over-emphasized and create an unbalanced perspective of contemporary identity (Lewicka, 2014). More importantly, it is the way in which these measures are informed that dictates the validity of the instrument in the field.

In his *Cultural Values and Beliefs Scale among Dakota/Nakota/Lakota People*, Reynolds (2006) reported that “participants experienced some confusion about how they should respond to the items” (p. 81). Although the researcher in this case requested feedback from participants, which assisted the development of future instruments, confusion could indicate the lack of community participation in the construction of the tool (Reynolds et al., 2006). Reynolds et al. (2013) attempted to correct this issue by utilizing knowledgeable individuals, cultural advisors, and Elders to inform the *Native American Cultural Values and Beliefs Scale*. The shift to a community-informed instrument provided a better understanding of the measure from the participant’s point of view, which also resulted in lower rates of non-response to the items (Reynolds et al., 2013).

While it is difficult to address all the concerns with identity measures, the literature supports the notion that community participation is important to the development of an instrument (Reynolds et al., 2013). Community participatory research helps create more localized, valid and relevant information to inform a measure. Given

academia's prior relationship to questions of Indigenous identity, it is necessary for these important concepts to be represented from a community standpoint.

### **Indigenous Identity**

The following describes the complexity of understanding Indigenous identity, while demonstrating that perceptions and expressions of Indigeneity are dynamic and contextual. For the purposes of this research, individual and communal cultural identity are examined (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Weaver, 2001), as well as various definitions and understanding of Indigeneity with a focus on self-identification (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Smith, 1999).

When Indigenous peoples discuss their identity, a unique sense of self is encountered, which ranges from fierce resistance to assimilation to compliance with dominant social norms (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Weaver, 2001). Through the theft of land and the relocation of Indigenous peoples, colonialism has fractured part of that fundamental relationship between Indigenous peoples and their sense of identity. What makes Indigenous Peoples' identity distinct is that relationship to colonialism, which can be held accountable for both the decimation and the resurgence of culture and identity (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel, 2010; Niezen, 2000).

Because of the distinguishing nature of identity, defining terms such as "Indigenous" or "Indigeneity" has been problematic, even for the most seasoned scholars (Corntassel & Hopkins Primeau, 1998; Smith, 1999). Even the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2015) chooses to understand the term "Indigenous" rather than to define it, given the vast diversity among its peoples (UNPFII, 2015). Although it is practically impossible to encompass all of Indigeneity in one concise definition,

characteristics such as self-identification, community identification, historical continuity prior to colonialism, relationship to ancestral territory, the presence of a distinct culture, language, and beliefs, as well as distinct social, economic and political systems are some of the determining factors in designating an Indigenous peoples (UNPFII, 2015).

Furthermore, the U.N. and many scholars agree that self-identification is the most effective way to describe Indigenous identity, hence this is an important feature in how I chose to carry out this thesis project (Niezen, 2000; Smith, 1999; UNPFII, 2015).

Communities create their own definition of identity. Gerald Alfred describes Kahnawake identity as including “localized Kahnawake, national Mohawk, broader Iroquois, and pan-Native” elements (Alfred 1996, p.18). Smith elaborates: “Indigenous communities have made even their most isolated and marginal spaces a home place imbued with spiritual significance and Indigenous identity” (Smith, 1999, p. 128). Vital components of this research are self-identification as an act of self-determination, and a reframing of the context of research by allowing Indigenous individuals to determine how they define and express their own Indigeneity.

Similarly, political identities have become a significant component of Indigeneity as a whole (Niezen 2000). Concepts of nationalism, peoplehood, and Indigenism have become the front-runners in advancing the Indigenous agenda on both a regional and international level (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel, 2010; Niezen, 2000; Pritchard, 2009). Past resolutions like the International Labour Organization and the Tribal Population Convention and Recommendations addressed Indigenous populations as “primitive” and did not allow for self-identification or self-representation (Niezen, 2000, p. 120). Now with over 300 million Indigenous people identified worldwide, Indigenous

voices of strength and power are gaining international attention and are becoming more evident within mainstream power structures (UNPFII, 2015). Moreover, protection by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples will continue to allow for Indigenous representation in all sectors including educational institutions (UNPFII, 2015). As stated by Alfred and Corntassel (2005):

Indigenous pathways of authentic action and freedom struggle start with people transcending colonialism on an individual basis – a strength that soon reverberates outward from the self to family, clan, community and into all of the broader relationships that form an Indigenous existence. In this way, Indigeness is reconstructed, reshaped and actively lived as resurgence against the disposing and demeaning process of annihilation that are inherent to colonials. (p. 612)

Stryker and Burke (2000) examined three understandings of identity: 1) culture of a people; 2) identity as part of a social collective; and 3) multiplicity of an individual's varying social and cultural roles. Weaver (2001) examined the concepts further by discussing self, community, and external identification. When relating these concepts to Indigeneity, these particular Indigenous authors confer that Indigenous identity is rooted in the historical context and deeply connected to the land, which forms a relationship that is distinct from that of others in Canada. One's own perceptions of self comprise multiple elements of identity and each individual's discernment of these concepts is structured uniquely. Consequently, we may observe tendencies with regard to individual or group identity, but there are no moulds to capture all of identity or Indigeneity, as these remain truly dynamic (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005).

It is through the ongoing processes of living and participating in all forms of language, culture, community and political resurgence that Indigeneity is expressed. These are important forms of self-identification and in turn provide additional space for acts of self-determination. Although it is vital to acknowledge colonialism, there is also

harm in allowing it to be the only point of reference when describing and expressing one's Indigeneity (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). This research will utilize Indigenous self-expression to assist in understanding Indigeneity and will provide more accurate and contextual criteria as determined from a community point of view.

The following section examines an important segment of Indigenous self-identification and self-determination as seen through community participatory research. Involvement of a community in research is the only way to ensure that information gathered is relevant to the Indigenous context and supportive of the Indigenous Peoples' Movement (Smith, 1999).

### **Community Participation**

As stated by Smith (1999) and Nabigon, Hagey, Webster and MacKay (1999), community participation leads to better research and helps to enhance relationships with Indigenous communities (Lavallée, 2009; Poudrier & Mac-Lean, 2008). Community participation, representation, and involvement need to be substantial to reverse mechanisms of ill-constructed identity (Smith, 1999). As Stringer explains, community research "is a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides peoples with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems" (Stringer 1996, p. 15). When members of a community are given the opportunity to become involved in expressing their own identity and representing themselves, both the community and the research will benefit (Smith, 1999).

Usborne and Taylor (2009) state that "theorists and researchers are increasingly calling for a conceptualisation of cultural identity that is dynamic, shifting and

historically embedded rather than one that is static, decontextualized and essentialist” (p.885). This idea has been reinforced by Indigenous scholars such as Smith (1999), Cote-Meek (2014) and Alfred and Cornthassel (2005), who support varied understandings and expressions of Indigeneity.

Therefore projections of identity based on homogeneous knowledge of pan-Indian culture are inaccurate at best, and reinforce racialization at worst (Cote-Meek, 2014; Smith, 1999). This research sets out to inform the creation of key Indigenous concepts that would better inform a measure that is based on localized community knowledge and not generalized assumptions about Indigeneity. The development of a valid and relevant measure of Indigenous identity is contingent upon the involvement of community members in the research, but also on the opportunity to positively self-identify and to recall stories that have shaped one’s Indigenous identity.

For example, Sharing Circles may also be used as a participatory way of indigenizing data collection. Sharing Circles are about shared experiences, bringing people together to learn from one another (Nabigon et al., 1999). The intent behind Sharing Circles is to “capture people’s experiences [...and] share all aspects of the individual – heart, mind, body, and spirit’ (Lavallée, 2009, p. 28-29; Nabigon et al., 1999). Above all else, it is vital to respect one another when participating in this meaningful act of sharing.

Furthermore, community participation is viewed as part of a decolonizing methodology, which becomes an active process throughout the research (Smith, 1999). Indigenizing academic research also creates an opportunity to challenge institutions ill-

informed biases and prejudices about a particular racial group or culture, and create awareness of alternative worldviews. Most importantly, collaboration and involvement with community in research is an effective way of ensuring respectful, culturally appropriate and ethical relationships in research.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is informed by an Indigenous research agenda, which is explained by Smith (1999) as a “goal of social justice” (p. 120). The researcher aimed to privilege and promote Indigenous peoples’ voices (Smith, 1999). This orientation was employed by the researcher in order to endorse the following three main methodologies: reframing, decolonization, and self-determination. These three methodologies support Indigenous peoples by re-contextualizing Indigenous identity, decolonizing the research process, and supporting self-determination through self-identification (Smith, 1999). For the purpose of this research project, reframing was the main theoretical framework, which enabled concepts of decolonization and self-determination to gain momentum in the Peoples’ movement (Smith, 1999).

Colonial discourse has affected and continues to affect Indigenous peoples and their lives. History has been perverted and distorted to the extent that it has created disengagement between many individuals and their own sense of identity (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Smith, 1999; Usborne & Taylor, 2009; 2010). Smith (1999) explains how to re-contextualize the conversation:

The framing of an issue is about making decisions about its parameters, about what is in the foreground, what is in the background and what shadings or complexities exist within the frame [...] reframing is about taking much greater control over the way in which indigenous issues and social problems are discussed and handled. (p. 154)

The theoretical orientation in this research is to reframe the conversation surrounding Indigenous identity, by supporting study participants in self-determining the elements that constitute their own Indigeneity, rather than having a researcher or academia speculate about their identity. For example, the literature search revealed that Indigenous identities encompass a wide variety of concepts including family, community, land, spirituality, and culture (Nietschmann, 1995; Nabigon et al., 1999; Guenther, 2006). Therefore it makes sense to choose a research method that would embrace the authentic voice and experience of Indigenous participants rather than the re-establishment of limited or skewed academic perceptions. Reframing as a concept gives the participants “greater control over the ways in which indigenous issues and social problems are discussed and handled” (Smith, 1999, p. 15). In this case, reframing the colonial context was done with the application of an Indigenous research agenda while employing community participatory research methods to aid with institutional decolonization (Smith, 1999). Additionally, an integrated approach (Bradley et al., 2007) was employed for the data analysis process, which uses a combination of inductive and deductive methods rather than employing a purely deductive or top down approach. This approach was supportive of both the reframing of Indigeneity and an Indigenous research agenda (Smith, 1999).

According to Smith, there are at least two ways to advance the Indigenous agenda: by engaging in community initiatives and by creating spaces for Indigenous worldviews within institutions (1999). By utilizing community participation on a university campus, the project attempts to accomplish both. First, the exploration gathered personal accounts of how individuals define their Indigeneity, which supports

reframing concepts of identity. Second, the Sharing Circles as a method of data collection assisted in decolonizing the research process and expanded the opportunities for the application of Indigenous methodologies within academia.

As stated above, this type of agenda is based on a “set of approaches that are situated within the decolonizing politics of the Indigenous Peoples’ movement... it becomes a goal of social justice” (Smith, 1999, p. 120). This research is not simply about informing an identity measure, but about the participants gaining control over the ways in which their identity is perceived and understood.

## **Method**

For the purposes of this project, a community participatory research method was used to discover how Indigenous peoples define Indigeneity and how their lived experiences have contributed to their identity. Community participatory research or community action research places the voices of the community at the centre of the project (Smith, 1999, p. 41). In this project, Sharing Circles were used as a method to integrate Indigenous participant perspectives in the outcome of the research; community perspectives will be integral to the future development of an Indigenous identity measure. The use of Sharing Circles as a method was important in achieving the goal of understanding Indigeneity, but also when considering the Indigenous experience in the academic research context. While some might equate Sharing Circles as being similar to focus groups, their aim is to capture people’s experiences, while keeping within an Indigenous context and research framework (Lavallée, 2009). Other differentiating elements include the use of specific protocols and/or ceremony, and having the researcher participate in the Sharing Circles as an equal member (Nabigon et al., 1999).

As described by Lavallée (2009), Sharing Circles are inclusive of community-specific protocols, values, and beliefs (p. 28). Sharing Circles are used as a method to create a comfortable space for people to express their cultural and personal experiences surrounding concepts of identity (Stevenson, 1999). In this context, providing a cultural and respectful approach is foremost, thus ensuring that participants feel safe in sharing aspects of their identity to the researcher and with others in the Circle.

Three Sharing Circles were facilitated by the researcher to gather information from the participants. Prior to the Circles, the researcher sought teachings and guidance about running a Sharing Circle from a trusted Elder, Cheryle Partridge, who was also a professor in an Indigenous program at Laurentian University. Consulting with an Elder is an important part of mentoring for cultural preparedness. The Elder shared that although Sharing Circles are often conducted as a formal traditional ceremony, it was made clear to the learner/researcher that she would be conducting Circles for the purposes of gathering information only. With guidance from the Elder, the researcher informed the participants about what her role was and was not. For example, she shared with the participants that she was not qualified to offer a traditional prayer, drum song, or smudging ceremony. However, she was able to facilitate a Sharing Circle using a welcome message, purpose of the Circles, research goals, sharing of information amongst participants as well as explain the roles and obligations of each participant (C. Partridge, personal communication, Oct 2015). Therefore, this particular Sharing Circle was adapted for the purpose of the research, according to the teachings received. Key aspects of the Sharing Circles were present in the form of the sharing of knowledge, the sharing

of a feast, and the creation of something greater together. It is important to note that the researcher kept in touch with the Elder throughout the duration of the Circles.

### **Sample**

The sample for the research consisted of 10 individuals (four men and six women) from the Laurentian University campus in Sudbury, Ontario, who self-identified as First Nation, Métis, Inuit, or Indigenous. The participants were divided into three groups, separating students from employees, to assist in preventing unequal power relationships from influencing participant responses. Field of study or work did not limit eligibility; however, additional information such as maternal language was noted in the biographical portion of data collection, to better orient the research during data analysis and to provide an alternate medium for participants to express their identity.

For this project, recruitment was done by distribution of a letter of invitation (see Appendix A) through Aboriginal Student Affairs and the School of Indigenous Relations, and by word of mouth using criterion sampling. This method of sampling selects participants based on a predetermined criterion, in this case Indigenous self-identification (Patton, 2001). A letter of invitation was used to locate knowledgeable individuals who self-identified as Indigenous and also wished to contribute to the research topic. During the sampling process, it was important to consider, first, that not all individuals declare their cultural heritage within organizations like universities, and second, that some individuals who do identify as First Nation, Métis, or Inuit at Laurentian University are not aware of, or involved in, the Indigenous community on campus. According to the Laurentian University Multi-Year Accountability Agreement, 661 Indigenous students were registered full-time, and 274 part-time in 2013-2014 (LU, 2014). In addition,

Indigenous faculty numbers have risen to more than 20 in 2014-2015 (LU, 2014). It is important to note that the Laurentian University campus is located on traditional Anishinaabek territory; however, students may hold ancestry or affiliation with a variety of different Indigenous Peoples across Canada.

### **Consent**

Prior to commencement of data collection, participants read and had explained to them the parameters of the research and their role within the process. The researcher sought consent (Appendix B) to utilize materials gathered during the written Biographical Description of Self (Appendix C) and audio recordings of their participation in the Sharing Circles (Appendix D). The consent form clearly noted that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point and also to pass on specific questions during the Sharing Circles if they chose.

### **Ethics**

Sharing Circles are helpful in Indigenous research because they can mitigate discomfort felt by individuals who find support in hearing similar experiences in a group (Dudemaine, 1995; Restoule, 2006). In addition, the researcher/facilitator had experience in crisis intervention and a counsellor was made available to participants either during or after the circles. Because this research was strictly voluntary, individuals who chose to participate were not seen as vulnerable members; rather they were offering their voices to find solutions for a better understanding of Indigenous identity.

As well, participants were provided with the questions prior to the Sharing Circles, to confirm that they were still willing to participate. The research did not impact

a captive population, as there was no existing power relationship between the researcher and participants. Also, participants were divided into two groups to minimize responses due to power relationships between students and faculty. Finally, as stated in the letter of invitation and consent form, participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point, to pass on questions, and to strike any information from the record once the Sharing Circles were completed. It is important to note that each of the participants' desire to be involved in the research process was driven by their interest in the topic of research and their desire to participate in Indigenous research.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this research was done in two stages: Biographical Description of Self (Appendix C) and audio recordings of two Sharing Circles (Appendix D). The first of these assisted in orienting the researcher during data analysis and as supplementary data; the second provided extensive information about a variety of topics.

#### ***Biographical Description of Self***

This form (Appendix C) was an opportunity for participants to describe elements of their identity like ancestry and maternal language in their own words. It was completed prior to the Sharing Circles and provided by the researcher. This was a supplementary method of data collection, to give contextual information to the researcher. In addition, this provided a space for participants to define in their own words what aspects were important to their sense of identity.

### ***Sharing Circles***

The primary process of data collection was done through the use of Sharing Circles. As mentioned previously, similar to focus groups, Sharing Circles consist of a group of people assembling and sharing their experiences. In this case, the circles were employed to explore elements of Indigenous identity. In contrast to focus groups, many Aboriginal Sharing Circles are spiritual and recognize the Creator as part of the process (Lavallée, 2009; Nabigon et al., 1999). Nabigon et al. explains that, contrary to external empirical research, the objective of Sharing Circles is to understand historical experiences that express the roots of problems (1999).

It is important to note that Sharing Circles are usually seen as ceremony. However, in this case, it was made clear to the participants that although these circles were sacred in nature, they would not be considered ceremony in the traditional sense, as the facilitator was not qualified to perform them as such. Although I received teachings about Sharing Circles from an Elder, the most significant ceremonial elements used were protocols that included respect, active listening, acceptance, and confidentiality (Appendix D).

### ***Procedures***

Three Sharing Circle sessions were scheduled according to participant availability and held on the Laurentian University campus. On the day of the Sharing Circles, participants were welcomed and greeted with a feast provided by the researcher. Participants had the option of eating and drinking, as was their preference, before, during,



or after the Sharing Circles. The intent was to incorporate food to create a comfortable community environment as well as to thank the participants.

At each of the Sharing Circles, participants were guided through the procedure and reminded that their participation was voluntary in all respects. Information sheets and consent forms were distributed, explained, read, and signed before continuing. The participants were also asked to complete a short biographical description outlining general information about themselves. This form was provided by the researcher and completed prior to the Sharing Circles.

Participants in the Sharing Circles were asked questions about Indigeneity by the researcher while being audio recorded. One at a time, individuals had the option to respond or pass on the questions (Appendix D) before the researcher proceeded to the next participant in the Sharing Circle. The questions centered on identity, Indigeneity and how the participants came to understand these concepts. A total of five rounds of questions were asked to the group, in order to ensure a richness of data and to avoid limiting the responses of participants. After the questions were completed, a final round gave the opportunity for individuals to express any concluding thoughts about the research topic and the Sharing Circle method. Sharing Circles took approximately one to two hours to complete. Following the culmination of the Sharing Circle, participants were thanked, provided with copies of documentation, and a gift.

The feasting and gift-giving aspects of the methodology were vital to creating a safe and comfortable space for participants. As stated above, an assortment of food and drink was provided, including homemade bannock, wild meat chili, and baked goods to

create an atmosphere of community. In addition to the food, the participants were given a gift consisting of homemade beeswax candles and local organic honey from my family home. The offering of food and gifts for participants was a way of demonstrating my gratitude, but also to show my commitment to caring for the knowledge they have shared. This is consistent with concepts of reciprocity, which are standard and appropriate in the area (Lavallée, 2009).

It was important to create a space where Indigenous voices could be heard in the expression of their own Indigenous identity. The participants spoke casually on a variety of topics before and after the Sharing Circles, which supported a positive, safe atmosphere of sharing. Information gathered during the Sharing Circles created a starting point for further understanding how Indigenous peoples expressed their identity.

The data was analyzed using an integrated approach as described by Bradley et al. (2007). This approach involved a combination of an inductive method to code and develop themes, and a deductive method to organize themes into an organizational framework. This procedure involved a three step model of taxonomy, theme and theory (Bradley et al., 2007).

### **Key Assumptions**

A major assumption of the research project is the detrimental impact of colonial rule on historical and contemporary concepts of Indigenous identity (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Cote-Meek, 2014; Smith, 1999). Furthermore, these assimilative forces have, for many individuals, deteriorated cultural transmission of identity, which has resulted in poor health, low self-esteem, and lack of well-being (Poudrier & Mac-Lean,

2008; Usborne & Taylor, 2009; Weaver, 2001). Additionally, the research reflected upon past racialized academic tactics regarding Indigenous peoples, specifically the ascribing of constructed identities and the prevalence of generalized assumptions about Canada's First Peoples. Therefore for this research, it was important that colonization as a process was acknowledged during the data collection and analysis process. The next chapter reports on the findings, analysis and discussion.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Analysis, Findings, Discussion**

#### **Data Analysis**

As stated by many researchers, there are a variety of ways to conduct qualitative data analysis (Bradley, Curry & Devers, 2007). For this research, preliminary data analysis began with listening to participant responses in the Sharing Circle events, and followed through to the formal analysis stages. As supported by Bradley et al. (2007), analysis is an ongoing, continuous process that starts during data collection and continues throughout the research project.

For the purposes of this research, an integrated approach was utilized during data analysis, while applying the methods outlined by Bradley et al. (2007), which are taxonomy, themes, and theory. This approach employs an inductive method to code development and a deductive method to create an organizational framework for code types (Bradley et al., 2007). For the Sharing Circles, this approach induced codes by privileging participant responses and experiences and deduced a code structure based on historical background and contextual literature. This approach was well paired with Smith's (1999) ideas surrounding reframing of Indigenous issues, where induction creates a space for Indigenous people's voices to be promoted, rather than applying a purely deductive model that can mimic colonialism (Bradley et al., 2007; Smith, 1999).

In terms of analysis method, the researcher employed a three-step model laid out by Bradley et al. (2007): taxonomy, which is the formal classifying system also known as coding; themes that unify and organize recurring concepts; and theory, the set of general propositions that assist in predicting and interpreting phenomena (Bradley et al., 2007).

During the taxonomy stage, the researcher coded segments of text according to their content. For example, under taxonomy, words like “language,” “racism,” and “resistance” were applied to segments of text. The next stage gathered codes like “land” and “language” under a theme like culture. Lastly, the theory stage linked and organized themes: informed by Indigenous literature, history, participant testimonials, and the theoretical framework applied to the research.

### **Analysis Procedure**

As stated above, preliminary data analysis began during the Sharing Circles, as the researcher took note of recurring concepts and ideas present in participants’ responses while the Sharing Circle was unfolding. This continued through the transcription process and free-reading phase where the researcher became intimately familiar with the Sharing Circle transcripts (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Bradley et al., 2007).

Initial coding or the process of taxonomy was modelled after Bradley et al. (2007), where an inductive approach to code development was used to support participants in a self- determined expression of their own identity. This phase involved negotiating and testing many codes to confirm their position within the data set, until theoretical saturation was met (Bradley et al., 2007). The codes were then grouped into recurrent themes that unified concepts found within the transcripts. Finally the theory phase of analysis was done according to Bradley et al.’s (2007) integrated approach, where a deductive method was used to organize themes into an organizational framework, informed by the historical context, the researchers’ experiences with the participants and Indigenous academic literature, including authors such as Smith (1999), Alfred and Corntassel (2005), and Nabigon et al. (1999).

As stated above, reframing as a theoretical framework for data analysis encourages Indigenous issues to be discussed and solved according to Indigenous voices, rather than having a purely deductive or top-down approach, which mimics colonial imposition of perceived identity (Smith, 1999). The following outlines the prominent themes and concepts that emerged from the Sharing Circles.

## **Findings**

During the analysis of the Sharing Circles, three major themes emerged and were grouped under the following thematic titles: Culture, Colonization, and Self-determined Identity. These were uncovered during data analysis based on their frequent recurrence across participant responses in all Sharing Circles. Although participant responses differed from one another, multiple recurrent codes revealed that all participants shared experiences across these three major themes. More importantly, these themes all had some sort of impact and/or meaning on the identities of the participants.

In the first theme of Culture, participant's expressed many elements of Indigenous culture conveyed through language, land, and traditional teachings. These cultural teachings and territories were an important aspect of how participants expressed themselves in terms of individual and community identity.

The second major theme of Colonization depicted barriers to Indigenous identities as a result of external and mainstream bias, stereotypes and racism. Participants' stories about loss of land, language, knowledge, and family systems and their experiences with prejudice and racism were attributed to the impact of colonization. Participants did convey that the process of colonization had a powerful impact on how Indigenous identity was formulated.

Lastly, the theme Self-determined Identity incorporated positive, empowering feelings surrounding their identity. Participants proudly expressed concepts like resistance and resilience in the face of colonialism, as well as diverse reclamations of their own Indigenous identity. What follows next are the stories that participants shared which are divided across the three themes.

## **Culture**

Culture, as described by the participants, revolved around three elements: language, land, and traditional teachings. Although language, land and traditions are inextricably intertwined, the participants gave further details about their traditional teachings. Within traditional teachings, Biimadiziwin and community were seen as significant elements. Biimadiziwin was described as the good life, living well, and having good relationships, which was essential to participants' identity. Community elements, described as vital to the participants, were manifested through community helping and sharing with one another, and Elders and teachers transmitting knowledge of identity to the next generation.

## ***Language***

According to participant responses during all three Sharing Circles, language was identified as a vital component in how participants lived their culture and identity. As Participant 3 explained:

P3: That's how I identify myself.... through the Ojibway language.

According to the participants, language helped to shape, understand, and transmit vital components of culture, as it was bound to concepts around land and various other knowledge systems. Participant 1 supported this notion:

P1: The voices of the land is in our language.

Participant 3 expressed her identity with absolute certainty and confidence with the following quote, referring to herself in the language:

P3: I just always knew I was an Anishinaabe-kwe.

In many cases, participants were most comfortable expressing their identity through language. For example, Participant 1 stated:

P1: I remember getting my spirit name... and it made complete sense. That was very much tied to that notion of language and the land, that's how I deeply perceive my identity.

Similar to Participant 1, 5 and 8 also used the language to self-identify through their spirit name. Additionally, this is integral to how participants introduced and expressed their identity to the world.

Several other participants shared that their language was their identity. For Participants 8 and 9, Indigenous languages such as Anishnabemowin was their first language during childhood. Further, that Indigenous languages held a prideful place in their identity. Regardless of whether the participant remained fluent in the language later in life, they maintained an important cultural relationship to that language for Participants 2 and 3. Participant 2 explained:



P2: [even] myself, who can barely speak, I still have a relationship to the language.

Participant 3 shared this sentiment and upheld the value of language in her identity development. Language was not mentioned by all participants, but did emerge in all Sharing Circles, demonstrating its importance to Indigenous identities.

It is important to note that language is a particularly important topic for culture, as it creates a vital link to accessing various types of knowledge. As stated by Participant 6, without language many cultural teachings risk becoming decontextualized and misinterpreted.

### ***Land***

A second element of culture that was referenced was the special importance of land. Much like language, land was not mentioned by every participant, but did emerge in all Sharing Circles. Participant 2 said that connection to the land is vital to Indigenous identity:

P2: I think that's one of the key values.

The importance of land was expressed by participants through two important elements: one was the aspect of living off the land by supporting oneself with food, while the second referred to going into the bush and engaging in elements of spirituality. Both elements deeply implied that land is of vital importance to how these participants expressed their Indigeneity.

When participants discussed land, it was often through a natural resources lens, where participants discussed finding sustenance on the land. For Participants 1, 2, 5 and

9, water, territory, animal and vegetable resources were seen as a means of being closer to one's cultural identity. For example, Participant 2 described interconnectedness with regard to land:

P2: ...importance of connection to the land, and to the environment... we're all connected. I think those values define Indigenous ways.

Harvesting from the land through gardening and hunting are ways for people to demonstrate their resourcefulness by providing for themselves and their communities. For example, Participants 3 and 5 both talked about how the land is a source of sustenance:

P5: Hunting, fishing... I like to support myself with clean meat.

P3: Living off the land ... having gardens... we grew our own foods and everything like that.... To me, that's what it means to be who I am.

Aspects of engaging and living off the land are also linked to conservation efforts and guarding precious natural resources for future generations to harvest. Participant 8 described how land is related to Indigenous law and how everything we consume comes from the land:

P8: When I think about what it means to be Indigenous, I think about law... land, air, water... We come from that place, we respect the land, we respect the air, and we respect the water... When we look at our food we are really grateful for that because it comes from the land... Wheat comes from the land, flour comes from the land, when you look at the food, it comes from the animals.... Water is life, and that's part of our teachings. As women we are life-givers and part of that work is to take care of water...

In addition to sustenance, the bush was discussed as an important spiritual component relating to land. Many participants envisaged the bush as an area where they could grow as individuals and be connected to creation, life, and land. Participants 2 and 3 both described their experiences going out into the bush:

P2: I was always in the bush ... it was through those teachings that I saw myself growing up, and embracing a lot of the cultural values and embraced my heritage.

P3: Boys used to love going in the bush, well I did that... on my own, I used to go way in the bush, just walk, no fear whatsoever.

The bush also created a space where individuals could be open to the teachings that nature had to offer. Participant 4 described how the bush became a teacher and helped to instil fundamental aspects of how she came to be:

P4: Going to sit in the bush, to learn to be a patient, quiet person, to learn to hear others, those teachings... those are all part of what I understand as an adult, to be the teachings of my identity as a First Nations person.

Finally, Participant 5 saw land or bush as a connection that is innate and comes naturally to her:

P5: Personally, I'm in love with the forest... being outside, living off the land, hunting and fishing...

Many participants stated that land was intrinsically related to their sense of identity. For many participants, land was the central classroom where they could entrench themselves in their family, community, and cultural identity.

In summary, the participants felt strongly that engaging and connecting to the land, and harvesting from it were essential aspects of Indigenous culture. Whether it was

fishing, hunting, or gardening, working on the land and with the land was viewed as fundamental to an Indigenous identity.

### *Teachings*

The third element of culture was teachings. These are inseparable from one another as they were linked together like a web of knowledge, educating individuals on everything from culture to identity and humanity. Some of the most talked-about concepts were Bimaadiziwin and the importance of community, Elders, and teachers. All participants shared a variety of teachings, which touched on the following:

#### *Bimaadiziwin*

Many of the teachings discussed by participants revolved around living in a good way and having good relationships, also known as Bimaadiziwin in the Anishinaabe language. Here, relationships are not only used to describe person-to-person interactions, but also individuals relating in a good way to all of creation in the world around them. Participant 4 described the concept succinctly:

P4: I want to live in right relationships to my community... to my family, to my work, community and to nature and the world around me.

When asked about values important to Indigeneity, Participants 5 and 2 described Bimaadiziwin as including relationships to land:

P5: Having respect for the land.

P2: Looking at seven generations, thinking of the world, of nature and of everything as connected...

Participant 8 described her interpretation of Bimaadiziwin as explained through a braid metaphor:

P8: Having the sweet grass philosophy of mind, body, spirit...loving, kind, caring, being able to walk in that good way... To be grateful for everything that you have, being grateful just for being here... the gift of being present.

The Grandfather teachings were brought up by several participants in all three Sharing Circles. Although these teachings are distinct, they are closely related to aspects of Bimaadiziwin. For many participants, these teachings were seen as a way to live well with yourself, others, your communities, and the natural world. When participants were asked to describe values important to Indigeneity, Participants 2, 6, 8 and 10 described Grandfather teachings:

P8: It encompasses the Grandfather teachings.

P10: The seven Grandfather teachings – I practice respect, I practice honesty, courage.

P6: Some important values... the Grandfather teachings.

P2: I think [of] the seven Grandfather teachings, I think of humility as one of the biggest ones.

Participant 8 supported the importance of these teachings and elaborated on the struggle of not only walking in a good way, but staying on that path:

P8: It's hard to walk in those teachings, to be able to have those values, to be respectful, to be kind, because we have our bad days, we have good days, and there are days when we don't do that, so we have to reflect, reflect back on if we hurt anybody, or if we did any wrong... to be mindful...

Bimaadiziwin also relates to relationships we have on an individual and community level. Helping and sharing with community were seen as vital components to living in a good way. Participant 9 recalled learning positive and helpful community relationships as a child:

P9: Growing up on the land, it was always about community, family.... we would go to our trap lines and our families would live together, and we would share things, we would share the fish we caught, my great uncle would get the partridge, they would share these things, it was all about helping one another.

This sentiment was supported by Participant 8, who elaborated on the importance of responsibility towards community:

P8: Community looks after community, whether we want to or not... when people are going through some hard times, our community all comes together.

Lastly, Participant 7 explained that Bimaadiziwin is not simply an Indigenous teaching, but a human teaching:

P7: At the end of the day, we are all humans, we have the same blood, we have the same emotion, we need to be human first.

Concepts surrounding living in a good way are the foundation for many Indigenous cultural teachings. They create an environment of collaboration, respect, interconnectedness, and responsibility. The value of responsibility applies to how you treat yourself, the community that surrounds you, and finally the natural environment. The following section will further explore the participants' experiences with community Elders, teachers, and leaders. Their experiences will highlight the importance of belonging.

### *Community*

Community is a concept brought up by many of the participants. First, participants discussed how community members such as Elders, teachers, and leaders are valued for their expertise and capacity to transmit cultural knowledge. The second aspect of community that participants discussed revolved around the importance of creating community to maintain or develop a level of group belonging. According to the participants, both of these elements were seen as essential to individuals and communities having a strong and healthy sense of identity.

It was clear throughout the Sharing Circles that most participants felt strongly about the importance of the Elder role in the construction of their identity. The terms “Elder” and “teacher” were not limited to the formal sense, but are used to refer to cultural leaders within their communities who aid in the formation of individual and group identity.

When asked, “Who taught you about your identity?” Participant 1 responded:

P1: I’d have to say my grandfather... straight up... he was the one who showed me everything... took me out on the land, showed me traditional practices... showed me responsibility towards community.

Similar responses were shared by Participants 4, 6, 7, and 9:

P4: My parents and my grandparents taught me about my identity.

P6: Elders helped me understand more about my Anishinaabek identity.

P7: My family, my parents, I used to listen to it in family gatherings.

P9: I grew up with my grandparents... they taught... just by watching them, that’s how they taught me.

In the above cases, close community or family members offered guidance and teachings in the formation of participants' identity. However, in a few cases, participants testified to having others, outside of their close family and community, become individuals of significance in their life – leaders who took it upon themselves to help, heal, and teach young ones. Participant 1 described having an Aboriginal teacher help him deal with feelings of confusion during adolescence:

P1: I was just getting into some trouble as an adolescent... and an individual came in from British Columbia... He called me out of class... It was the first time I saw an Aboriginal teacher in a high school... He said, 'Look me in the eye and introduce yourself'... That was a very strong moment as an adolescent, that's when [my] identity became really clear.

Some Elders and teachers offer more than a moment of insight, but assist in lifelong learning and served as a connection to a network of different types of communities such as drum groups. Participant 5 described her experiences during adolescence and how an Elder became a close friend and mentor:

P5: When I was fourteen... I met an Elder and he was doing traditional teachings and I was like... ohh!! That's what it means to be Native! I started talking to him...he introduced me to a whole bunch of women. I joined a drum circle, and I ended up getting my spirit name, my colours...going to ceremonies with him... I just stuck around him for the rest of my life.

What is present across all Sharing Circles is the belief that community helps to share knowledge, and instil a sense of belonging and pride in community members. People felt that they were a part of something greater than themselves. Participant 8 explained the feeling of belonging she experienced when returning to her community:



P8: When I was about 15, that's when I began to know who I was... that I belonged to a First Nation... I had Indigenous roots... I had a place to call my own... there were people that were familiar and similar to my facial characteristics.

Community as a concept was extraordinarily important to all participants. It came up in various contexts, with explanations that community was not only a participant's town, family, or First Nation, but could also extend to a drum group or post-secondary program or class. Participant 10 talked about the impact residential schools had within her family system and how she found a new source for cultural teachings in her educational program:

P10: It wasn't home that taught me anything... The people I'm coming into contact with... the people in my program, my professors, they're the ones who are helping me learn.

These participants expressed that post-secondary teachers are not only helpful to educate individuals, but have become communities for learners to build networks, solidarity, and empowerment.

Lastly, it is belonging to a community that makes Indigenous cultures, knowledge, languages, and identity accessible to everyone. Participant 8 explained how fundamental it is to have a sense of community belonging:

P8: That sense of belonging, that sense of purpose, that sense of identity and that self-esteem... those are really big, and that's what's missing for some of our young people... They miss that... and yet they're searching for that sense of culture, that sense of identity, that sense of who they are as an individual.

It is undeniable that participants felt strongly about elements of culture, language, land, and more specifically, teachings on the good life and the importance of community. The following section will outline participants' experiences with forces of colonization as seen through loss and negative representations.

## **Colonization**

Participants across all Sharing Circles agreed that colonization impacted how their Indigenous identity was shaped. It has moulded not only how Indigenous peoples view themselves and their communities, but also how all of Canadian history perceives what and how Indigenous peoples should be. Participants 5 and 6 responded to the question "Has colonization impacted your Identity?" as follows:

P6: Yeah!! For sure colonization has impacted my Indigeneity.

P5: I think it's impacted everybody's [identity] to a degree.

There was general consensus across participants that colonization affected not only Indigenous people, but all people in Canada. Participant 4 explained:

P4: Colonization affects Indigeneity in that it occurred... that occurred – period! So in that sense affects who all the people in that Canadian timeframe would be and ... how those things passed on down.

The pressures of colonization would force some individuals to assimilate, or drop out elements of their identity. For some, constantly having to assert their identity in a multicultural environment also created tension. Participant 2 described the complexities of having mixed ancestry:

P2: English, French, Indigenous, has created an environment where it's colonial, but in a way a defensive framework.

He continued to explain that a culturally defensive framework that privileged and prioritized a culture while neglecting the Indigenous background becomes an assimilative mechanism.

Participant 4 said that for her, subjugation and oppression gives her a greater motive to anchor herself in a cultural identity as a means of objecting to or resisting colonization:

P4: So colonization affected not just mine, but most people.... as a way that you had to begin to redefine who you were, and in a sense maybe become a way of strengthening certain things within ourselves... to hold onto things even more firmly because it was a protest to colonization.

Within the theme of colonization, there was also a heavy focus on loss and negative representations that emerged as key concepts. The first refers to loss of language, land, knowledge systems, and family structure; the second describes participants' experiences with racism, prejudice, and embedded colonization. The following describes the two concepts of colonization and how they have impacted the identities of the participants.

### ***Loss***

Loss of language, land, and knowledge systems were all credited as having an impact on the formulation of the participants' identity. In addition, there was a focus on the impact of family structure degradation through forced removal of children, either by way of residential schools or the child welfare system. All of these concepts were viewed by participants as responsible for the partial or complete absence of cultural transmission from one generation to the next. Many participants held parents' or grandparents'

internalized shame responsible for the lack of transmission, a shame also internalized by the following generations. Others attributed the complete loss of knowledge about Indigenous identity to the interruption of cultural transmission methods in generations preceding them. Loss as a concept was inseparable from how individuals perceived colonization and in turn played an important role in how they saw themselves. According to the participants, loss of language, land, family structure and diverse forms of knowledge were painful reminders of a forgotten history.

Although language is a vital part of how people identified themselves, loss of that language is of equal importance to cultural identity. One of the primary educational institutions used to destroy language and culture was cited by Participant 8:

P8: My mom didn't speak the language because she came from residential school... that was something that was taken from her, her language.

Loss of the language began in one generation through an abysmal education system, but continued inter-generationally. As a result of constant stigmatizing of Indigenous languages, individuals who spoke them as a mother tongue stopped transmitting them (TRCC, 2015). Participant 8 explained a barrier to learning an Indigenous language:

P8: I really wished that I had known the language... Why didn't he teach us when we were young? He had an opportunity to teach us, but he didn't.... He was told that you don't need that language... you shouldn't teach it to the young ones.

Participant 9 remembered speaking an Indigenous language as a mother tongue:

P9: My first language was Ojibway... I spoke it fluently till I was five years old.

She continued by discussing how negative perceptions of language were perpetuated to the point where assimilative forces became internalized within her communities:

P9: I'd hear students in high school... They would think it was wrong to speak the language or not cool... you know and I would hear that and growing up I would start to think... maybe it's not cool to speak our language.

This degradation of language proficiency created a situation for fluent speakers, where it became difficult to maintain their level of language expertise. Participant 3 described her experience as a fluent speaker:

P3: Most of the time I don't have anyone to speak to and that's something I wish I had here.

Loss or deprivation of language affected all other elements of knowledge, from land to spirituality. Participant 6 explained why it is such a devastating process to lose your language, or never to have known it in the first place:

P6: I don't speak my language, I speak some words... but not nearly enough to be able to transmit it... If you can't speak your language, there are so many other things that you can't do.

Language was described throughout three Sharing Circles, demonstrating its importance to the conceptualization of Indigenous identity. As stated above by Participant 6, language is a transmitter of knowledge in and of itself. Without it, the understanding of land becomes superficial.

Land, much like language, is linked to all other areas of Indigenous culture. The loss of land often occurs through displacement of peoples to a new area, or to a fraction

of the territory once held in title. Participant 7 described his family's experiences with displacement:

P7: My paternal clan was displaced ... to an area we never belonged to... our Elders really faced a lot.

Like most forms of assimilation, the displacement occurred in one generation and was absorbed and internalized by the next. Participant 9 described not understanding this oppression because she was fortunate enough to grow up in the bush. Later in life, she began to understand the harm:

P9: I didn't realise how oppressed we were living on the reserve. I just didn't know it because I grew up in the bush, on our ancestral land... I was wondering why we had this little town, our reserve....

For Participant 6, the loss of land was most aggravating when individuals demonstrated ignorance about the territory on which they reside:

P6: To have conversations now either with native or non-native living in the Atikameksheng territory, people just don't know where they're living.

This frustration is not only limited to ignorance on size and location of the traditional territory, but extends to the contempt for, and perceived impertinence of, the treaties. Participant 6 continues:

P6: When our treaty was signed there was an intention that our chief wanted to ensure happened... they don't know... in order to settle here, it was at the expense of others.

Loss of land and displacement of peoples is closely linked to the systematic breakdown of family structures. The following describes the implications of displacing

communities, families and children and explores the impacts of separating families and communities.

Similar to loss of language and land, attacking family structures was a logical goal for assimilationist policies attempting to eradicate Indigenous cultural identity (TRCC, 2015). In deconstructing a complex familial system, understanding of individual and community identity became lost. Most devastating is the destruction of family cultural transmission methods. Without strong methods of transmission, a healthy and strong family identity becomes difficult to attain (Poudrier & Mac-Lean, 2008). Participant 8 described her understanding of colonial policies with regard to family structure:

P8: When they first came over, they saw the relationships that our people had with their children... The love that we had for our children is special... Grandmothers and grandfathers would take care of the little ones... They would teach the older ones... There was a process. There was a way of life.

Some participants felt that family structure was the first focus of “integration” attempts. Although residential schools attacked many elements of cultural knowledge, it was most detrimental to the family systems (TRCC, 2015). Participant 8 described what Indigenous people have faced in terms of family breakdown:

P8: Looking at the historical background of our ancestors and what they’ve been through in terms of residential schools, sixties scoop and the goal was to separate family.

Separating families and communities was viewed as a key to “killing the Indian in the child” (TRCC, 2015). Participant 9 elaborated on the impact of these assimilationist policies on families and communities:

P9: The impact of colonization is immeasurable, and it affected so many systems... family systems... I can't measure it.... It's taken a lot from me and my family, and from different families and communities.... There's a lot of healing that's still going on...

Child removal also impacted the following generations, in that it damaged and diminished people's parenting knowledge and abilities. Having been raised through dysfunctional institutions, individuals seldom had proper parenting role models. In some cases people perpetuated parenting "skills" they had learned in the education system, as mentioned by Participant 10:

P10: My mother didn't do a very good job at the whole parenting thing...

Additionally, the breakdown of the family structure created a disconnect with community networks as described by Participant 10:

P10: I was very used to moving, we moved once every year and if it wasn't a year, she made up for it twice the next year.

Participant 8 described the impact of being away from family and community:

P8: When I moved to Toronto we didn't have that sense of collectiveness, cohesiveness in terms of family and unity... never really saw too many Aboriginal people in Toronto.

As stated above, residential schools were one of the pivotal strategies for the Canadian government and churches in assimilating Indigenous peoples into the general population (TRCC, 2015). The history surrounding these schools is very present in the participant's expression of identity. Participant 10 described the government's assimilationist policy concerning marriage:



P10: My grandmother attended residential schools and when she left, she married my grandfather who was white and...she lost her status.

These types of policies severely impacted how people see themselves, and how they understood their social positioning within Canada. Layered on top of this targeted family destruction was a mandate of maintaining ignorance about the child removal process, which perpetuated harmful symptoms of the system. Participant 9 described learning the history of her people:

P9: I used to feel sick when I'd hear about residential schools, I would literally get sick, I would throw up, my heart would pound and I didn't know why... I really retain stuff like that, I just felt like... I needed to forgive the government. For me, the key thing was forgiveness.

She continued by describing her confusion about her parents:

P9: My parents, they went to residential schools. My father was treated brutally; my mom would never talk about it... And you know they weren't there, I want to honour my parents, but they weren't the greatest because they didn't know... and those things are passed on... I was very wounded. I didn't understand why my parents weren't around. I had to forgive them.

What is striking with this participant is the honour and respect she maintained for her parents because of what happened to them in the schools. In part her confusion as a child was due to the lack of acknowledgement of residential school history by community and society, but later in life she came to realise what happened to them, and reframed a positive disposition by honouring their experiences.

According to the TRCC report (2015), a new system of assimilation began taking place when residential schools began to be phased out. So-called child welfare authorities

would continue the systematic removal of children from their home to become wards of the federal government. Sometimes referred to as the “Sixties scoop,” the term is used to describe a trend of above-average incidence of removal of Indigenous children, which still persists today (Cote-Meek, 2014; TRCC, 2015). For Participant 6, being adopted into a caring family provided a good base of cultural knowledge to build upon:

P6: My adoptive parents [...] they were comfortable making us aware that ‘yeah you’re adopted kids, you’re Ojibway...’ so they were pretty good at creating that foundation for us...

For Participant 5, the systematic removal of children created issues on a community level:

P5: We were displaced from our families so I didn’t get to grow up on my reserve... it lead to a lot of problems in my community.

She described the cultural disconnect she felt growing up away from her community:

P5: It wasn’t really discussed as a child... I was raised in a non-native family, so there wasn’t much discussion about that...

This process can contribute to confusion in young adults. She described not being taught about her Indigenous identity:

P5: Nobody really talked to me about my identity, which [I] found really confused me during my adolescent years.

What is described above is heavily linked to obstructed cultural transmission of knowledge. The government led educational activities were imposed inter-generationally and impacted children’s identities.

When discussing loss of knowledge transmission, it is important to consider the impact of language, land, and family systems, but these include a much wider range of subjects such as ceremony, tradition, and oral history, among others. Individuals reported having little or no knowledge transmission from one generation to the next for various reasons such as displacement or shame. In some cases, Elders explicitly chose not to transfer knowledge. As well, many individuals reported having periods of time when identity was entirely misunderstood or unknown.

Participants referred to a lack of cultural transmission from their parents or grandparents and a lack of understanding about their own identity. Participant 3 mentioned one type of knowledge missing from her identity:

P3: I didn't grow up with ceremonies or anything like that.

Many residential schools played a major role in the intentional obstruction of the transmission of culture and identity. Participant 10 described the power of residential schools to assimilate within three generations:

P10: As someone who comes from a family with a history of residential school attendance, and the traumas associated with that... [forgoing] all identity... indigenous identity will not be transferred... my grandmother made that decision, you will not learn your heritage, and my mother she didn't teach it to us.

The obstruction of cultural transmission directly impacted many of the participant's identities during their early lives. Participant 10 described her mother's knowledge of her identity:

P10: I wasn't raised in a household that had any sort of culture... my mom used to [...] make dream catchers [...] to sell at the powwows, and I look back at her

explanation of what it was... and she was trying but she didn't know what she was talking about.

For many members of the Sharing Circles, confusion and lack of understanding of identity as a child was apparent. Participant 5 described how she learned about elements of her identity:

P5: When I was younger, I wasn't really taught about my identity all that much... I learned most about it in school, which is not enough... stuff like Louis Riel, and the fur trade and of course *Dances with Wolves* (laughs)... Nobody really talked to me about my identity, which I found really confused me, especially when I was going into my adolescent years.

For Participants 2 and 8, not understanding or lacking context when dealing with matters of identity was a familiar experience:

P2: As a child, I never really had any experiences.

P8: I didn't really know who I was when I was young, I had lost identity...

The lack of knowledge transmission is also associated with Métis people, where there is mixing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Participant 2 explained how his Indigenous identity was denied and intentionally not transferred, with the justification of protecting a Northern Ontario Francophone identity:

P2: It was my great-grandmother who was Aboriginal and they just called her the odd duck... it wasn't even said that she was Aboriginal ... they ignored her and segregated her and I never got to meet her... My grandparents, they focused on the French and they really ignored their Indigenous background, so I didn't get [teachings] as a child.

These circumstances remain today for this participant:

P2: It's a foreign concept to people in Northern Ontario, that you'd have a French person who is Aboriginal... There was a lot of tension between the French and English, and I think that caused a lot of French families to go into defensive mode, in order to keep... and promote [their French] culture...

When assessing to what degree a lack of transmission impacts an individual's identity, it is alarming to think of how many individuals were assimilated, losing some or all of their cultural identity. The impact is grave, but the situation is not hopeless.

Participant 10 demonstrated the impact of assimilation on her, while reclaiming her identity as she moves forward:

P10: As a person who up till a few years ago identified as white... umm yeah.... that's obviously colonization.

Lack of cultural transmission contributes to assimilation, but also to the false construction of Indigenous identities based on stereotypes. Participants who lacked cultural knowledge or a strong sense of Indigeneity are likely to appropriate false identities for lack of a better understanding of their culture. Misconceptions surrounding Indigeneity have been perpetuated for centuries and are internalized as dysfunctional identities. The following describes participants' experiences with negative representations of Indigenous peoples.

### ***Negative Representations***

Participants across all Sharing Circles described experiences surrounding negative perceptions of Indigenous peoples. Examples cited included bias, racism, prejudice, and a diverse assortment of stereotypes which were not only propagated from outside one's

own cultural group, but also within one's community, family and even self. The negative representations were described in two streams. The first referred to outside voices, which deals with external sources of false representations and negative perceptions; the second is embedded in colonization and describes internalized forms of negative representations. Both of these are vital to understanding negative representations and how they impacted the participants' identity.

The outside voices of colonization manifest in many ways: prejudice, bias, and racism. These negative voices are mechanisms that perpetuate stereotypes, create false identities of Indigenous peoples, and are detrimental to personal and community wellbeing. Participant 9 described what she heard about Indigenous peoples growing up:

P4: It's always negative things... that's what I heard when I was a kid... there weren't too many positive things.

Participant 2 shared one of the first times his identity became clear. He explains his experience as a First Nation person in a majority Francophone town during a time of political crisis:

P1: During the Oka crisis, it was a really 'interesting' time to be in a French community watching this stuff unfold across the country, so the identity piece became really sensitized.

For others, it was the negative perception of how Indigenous women were portrayed. Participant 4 remembered learning of the stigmatization of First Nation women when she was old enough to start dating:

P4: I wouldn't say ... they said: "you're a First Nations woman" until I became a woman who was going to start dating... My mom said: "Some guys that you bring home are not going to be happy that you're First Nations".

For some participants perceiving negative images of themselves was detrimental to their healthy sense of self. Participant 9 described how these negative perceptions became internalized within individuals and communities:

P9: People are calling people savages and drunks... which was really sad, it made me ashamed of who I was... It's not cool to be Native, and it's not cool to be from the bush... These were the words I was getting and I was believing them.

Participant 2 described the process as “othering of people,” which leads to feelings of shame and confusion. Participant 9 expressed the shame felt by many people:

P9: People hear today that it's not OK to be Aboriginal, there's that shame attached to that, and I think a lot of people feel ashamed, it's a sad truth, that's what I had to deal with and it's a matter of taking that jacket of shame off...

These representations also had a tendency to impede a self-determined identity and dictated how people should perceive their ideal Indigenous identity. “Ideal” constructions of Indigeneity are perpetuated through societal expectations, and internalized as notions of identification that are false or skewed. This participant demonstrated that her identity is not “ideal” and “goes against the grain” of Indigeneity:

P10: I don't live off the land, I've never lived off the land... I hate the snow, I hate coldness, I hate being wet, I love my mattress... and these things don't really scream Aboriginal, you know? (Laughs) They don't!! I identify as an Aboriginal person, I'm definitely urbanized though...

There also remains a strong perception that identity is linked to genetics.

Participant 10 continued:

P10: If you're talking blood quantum, I just hit that line, just to say that I'm Native enough to be Native... but I still strongly believe that that's the culture I identify with.

In addition to blood quantum impositions, this participant illustrated that physical appearance is still used as a determinant of someone's identity:

P10: I can identify myself as Indigenous and never give an explanation, and its OK... cause I look the part, and then you can take a blond-haired, blue-eyed person who practices all the things I don't – will you believe them?

For these participants, the imposition of blood quantum and physical appearance were reinforced by societal perceptions of Indigenous identity. This imposition not only limited their self-determined identity, but distorted the diversity and complexity of identity and Indigeneity as a whole.

Embedded colonization was used by Participant 8 to refer to the internalization of generations of oppression, where negative representations had become entrenched within individual and community perceptions of identity. Participant 10 remembered being singled out by her teacher: "Can you tell us about powwows?" The participant recalled being confused, as she remembered powwows as beaded fairs more than cultural experiences. At the time, she had not understood she was Indigenous:

P10: I didn't understand any of it, so I look back and I think.... Holy!! They knew and I didn't.

She also described a situation where negative representations became internalized and embedded. She recalled how her mother explained a racist encounter to her:



P10: We moved up to Thunder Bay, ummm you'd be surprised at how incredibly racist Thunder Bay is... I remember the kids gathered around me and said: "See that girl over there... you can't be her friend." I said: "Why?"... "Because she's NATIVE!!" "I don't even know what that means...." "Well, she's an INDIAN."... I was going back home and asking: "Mom... why do those kids keep calling me a squaw? What does scalping mean?" But it wasn't until these moments when my mom started to explain some things, but it was very cut and dried... There was no history lesson in there, it was just like: "That's what the white people call Indians"... My mom was very ashamed of her culture.

The shame demonstrated above is an example of how negative representations become embedded and internalized over several generations. Participant 8 saw a solution:

P8: It's become embedded colonization, it's changed us... we lost our language, we lost our culture, we lost some of our traditions, and because of that, now we have to go back and revitalize that... to be able to bring back a sense of pride to our people, to know who they are again.

Although colonization needs to be acknowledged as having a significant impact on how individuals and communities self-determine their identity, there is a danger in allowing it to be the key determining factor. Participant 1 questioned and protested how colonization is seen:

P1: I really challenge the word "colonization", not from outside but from inside our own culture... I've had to unpack the word "colonization", and be careful of how it's applied to our youth... How we actually accept that term itself, and more importantly, what is it doing for us? Is it keeping us entrenched? It really is... We are entrenching ourselves.

As stated by Alfred and Cornthassel (2005), colonization should be considered in the formation of Indigenous identities but must not be the dictating factor. It has blocked the natural pathway of Indigenous knowledge transmission and embedded itself as the

major definition of Indigenous identity sadly, amongst some individuals and communities.

Regardless of colonial and assimilative forces, the participants demonstrated resistance, resilience, and reclamation of their own identity. The following theme describes the self-determined identities of the participants, and how they chose to reclaim their Indigenous identity regardless of negative impositions.

### **Self-determining Identity**

The last theme is centred on the empowerment of the participants as they self-determined their identity. The participants all acknowledged culture and colonization as important factors in the development of their identity; however, participants equally took part in acts of assertion of their Indigeneity. This theme describes how participants took action in defining and naming themselves; how they expressed experiences of resilience and resistance to colonization; and finally, how they reclaimed their Indigenous identity.

### ***Defining Indigeneity***

It was initially difficult for people to clearly articulate how they identified themselves as Indigenous persons. When asked “What does it mean to be Indigenous?” Participant 5 responded:

P5: That is really hard... it's different for everybody.

This participant's sentiment is supported by others, exposing the complexity and subjectivity of Indigenous identity. Participants 3 and 4 agreed, when asked about being Indigenous:

P3: I'm gonna have to think about that one for a bit...

P4: I'm gonna agree with her and say that's a toughie.

The impact of being labelled, analyzed and having one's identity dissected can be problematic for some. This is not surprising given the stereotypes that exist about Aboriginal peoples (Cote-Meek, 2014). Even the United Nations was reluctant to define who is Indigenous (UNPFII, 2015). Here, Participant 4 shared why.

P4: People are always defining our name... even Indigenous, Aboriginal, it starts to take away from the unique nation that I am, when you start to lump me in a larger group of people.

However, to others, the term "Indigenous" is empowering, as seen through a self-determining lens. Participant 1 examined the transition of nomenclature that has been applied to First Peoples:

P1: Being labelled as an Indian first as an adolescent, and having to carry the weight of that word Indian... eventually moving forward to becoming First Nation and then eventually Aboriginal... now the power inside Indigenous itself.... When I look at the word now, it's totally different from the term Indian...how far we've come to understand that terminology... that's what it means to me... you have to assert it, there's power in the word... Indigenous...you see it globally.

The concept of being the people original to an area is also a positive and vital component of one's Indigeneity. Participant 6 and 7 supported this notion too:

P6: I think Indigenous people are also hosts... if you or your family or your ancestors shared a moment with others... if you're not settling or your ancestors are not settlers to a place, then that can be a distinction to be Indigenous.

Sharing Indigenous regional identities was also raised by two participants as being important. Participants 1 and 6 examined the importance of regionalism in the formation of one's identity:

P1: When you think about regional identities, that's where that notion of Indigeneity comes into play for me.

P6: Who are indigenous in this area, that's what it means to be Indigenous.

Finally, Participant 10 believed that the only qualifying factor should be self-identification:

P10: If you're a person who identifies as such, then that should be enough.

At first, the term Indigeneity might not appear as a simple clear definition, however when you explore more closely what the participants were sharing, you come to realise and appreciate that Indigenous identities are diverse, have many layers, are interlinked with language, land, culture, tradition and history and are a strong source of self-determination and resilience. Indigeneity is also linked to life experiences such as resistance to, and resilience in the face of, colonization, and also to acts of reclamation.

In the section that follows three concepts are discussed that relate to how participants formulated elements of their identity through resistance to colonization and resilience in the face of oppression, but also, how reclamation of identity and Indigeneity were used to overcome and decolonize the colonial discourse.

### ***Resistance***

Resistance is an important concept in reframing how identity is seen. It assists "Indigenous people [to] resist being boxed and labelled according to categories which do

not fit” (Smith, 1999, p. 153). The participants were aware of the colonial discourse, and rather than having their path towards decolonization hindered, they shared stories about resistance of one’s identity (Smith, 1999). Participant 4 has always known how to resist colonization:

P4: To be born Indian is to be born political... That’s when I understood that wherever I went, I would always be the voice of my people... I think that’s part of who I am... I’ve learned over the years to do it with better kindness and generosity than I did in the beginning... [But] I had to become somebody beyond my original identity, in order to bring advocacy.

Resisting colonization, racism, and assimilative forces are all integral parts of becoming a self-determined individual. For many, becoming an advocate for social justice is a vocation more than a choice. Participant 10 described her resistance strategy:

P10: Colonization has definitely played a role in informing who I am today, and it’s played a role all the way down to me pushing back in this decolonization journey.

Part of the decolonizing process involves “moving towards the ideal of a self-determining Indigenous world” (Smith, 1999, p.120). This includes encouraging distinct self-identification while developing a cohesive community identity. Participant 4 saw a problem with generalizing concepts of identities:

P4: Creating a homogenous Indigenous Peoples versus a distinct Indigenous person... we have to find that balance of creating a unified force versus not losing the individual person that makes up that unified force.

Individuals are resisting colonial discourse through simple strategies outlined by Smith such as interventions and revitalization (Smith, 1999). Participant 6 exemplifies intervention by taking action and becoming involved in making a change:

P6: You can be extrinsically motivated your whole life, or you can reset your operating system and start doing stuff because it means something to you personally.... I had borrowed that concept and used it to reset my acculturated self, and started applying it to enculturating myself... to get more familiar with the Nish identity.

Participant 10 also intervenes by taking it upon herself to learn her history, culture, and Indigenous identity:

P10: I wasn't taught it from my parents, I wasn't taught it by my grandmother and so I'm teaching myself.

Finally, Participant 8 emphasized the need to revitalize languages, ceremonies, and traditions to support healthy individual and community identities:

P8: They have to be able to go back to that culture and to be able to identify who we are as individuals and share in our knowledge. We have teachers in our communities, Elders in our communities, people who know ceremonies – utilize what we have in our communities, and work towards that... If we're too busy going outside and trying to bring somebody else, then we're not learning from each other, we're not transmitting knowledge in terms of what we have and what we know.

All of these resistance examples and strategies showed how the participants fostered and strengthened their identities in order to support healthier, happier communities and the flourishing of individual identities. Participant 8 continued:

P8: You want to have that sense of purpose, that sense of belonging, to who you are, and once you know who you are, that's where that self-esteem comes from, that's where that pride comes from and it's a good way to live.

Resistance demonstrated by the participants points to the following theme of resilience. When participants protest colonial forces and maintain elements of their culture and identity, they demonstrate resilience to colonial forces.

### ***Resilience***

Resilience can be observed through survival and celebration (Smith 1999). These relate to “accentuat[ing] the degree to which indigenous peoples and communities have retained cultural and spiritual values and authenticity in resisting colonialism” (Smith, 1999, p. 146). Participant 5 demonstrated survival by celebrating the strength and resilience of Indigenous people while facing colonialism:

P5: I am very proud to be Native, and I like that it is [in] my nickname... I think I do that to kind of make up for when I was younger, I was kind of embarrassed 'cause I didn't hang out with Native people all that much... and, umm, I always saw the negative part of it...

Participant 9 described a similar experience of overcoming the weight of negative representations of her peoples:

P9: Those words that people said to me, I didn't want to be Native, I didn't want to be who I was, but now I'm proud... I was really grieved for the longest time. You know, I'm not angry anymore... It was just really hard.... I was really sad... But as soon as my eyes were opened I started to feel proud again... I can say I'm proud to be Aboriginal.

Participant 9 explained that her survival is possible thanks to the power of healing:

P9: I believe people need to heal... there's a lot of stuff that happened to us growing up, and going through our lives, these things taint us, and something hangs on to us.

For Participant 10, knowing herself later in life is an ongoing process, which demonstrates her tenacity in entrenching herself in her Indigeneity:

P10: I'm just learning my culture... you know, take it and truly understand it, and every day I learn something new.

Spirituality can be key in healing and resilience. For Participant 9, the Creator plays an important role:

P9: It was the Creator healing me, showing me who I really was as a person, as an Aboriginal woman... he allowed me to be Aboriginal, he placed me on this earth to be Aboriginal, and that's when my healing journey started ... Not being ashamed anymore... for that I'm grateful.

Participant 3 demonstrated her resilience by refusing to let damaging history dictate her life or identity:

P3: It's like I didn't let things affect me... personally... and I still don't. Even though I know what happened years ago, I don't let it affect me... and that's the way I live.

Lastly, resilience is a lengthy process but does lead to a strong assertion of identity:

P8: It wasn't until the last 20 years that I started to embrace who I was as an Aboriginal woman, in terms of knowing where I come from and having that sense of pride and having that sense of familial communal outlook...when you think about it... it's innate...

It is important to note that for several participants, post-secondary education played a pivotal role in how they understood their history, and how they perceived and expressed their identity. Participant 9 explained having an awakening when she began to understand her history and identity:



P9: [I] went to college and took this course in Indigenous studies... lo and behold, my eyes were opened to the real history, to what was actually happening... happened... then I saw the bigger picture, you know?

Participants 9 and 10 both felt strongly about the power of education:

P10: The [...] moment that really made me act on my culture was being in my sociology undergrad.

P9: For me the aha moment was in college, I think it was a process though.

Learning one's history can be a strong trigger to foster one's desire to become more knowledgeable on every aspect of life for Indigenous peoples. Participant 10 explained how university activated the desire to learn everything she could:

P10: I delved into residential schools and then I was, like, I've got to keep learning, and I've got to learn more. So every other essay I did after that all had to do with Indigenous people.

The participants acknowledged that the education they received was a gift that needed to be passed on and used for good within their communities. Participant 8 explained the responsibility of education:

P8: Those of us who go off to school and become educated and have learned our history and what has taken place, and we can go back and we can teach, and it's about learning, learning our way of life again.

For many participants, post-secondary education not only provided a community for them to be part of, but it was also a way to access self-determination information and strategies. Education assisted in teaching people their history, and offered a lifeline in terms of overcoming obstacles. The last concept incorporates all other themes of self-determining identities by supporting participants in self-identification.

### ***Reclaiming Identity***

The participants shared personal stories about how they reclaimed and continue to strengthen their Indigeneity. Some individuals utilized their spirit name, others their language, and others through embracing Indigenous ways in all aspects of their lives.

People identify themselves as more than First Nation, Indigenous, Aboriginal, or Native. They see themselves as they are: complex beings with unlimited facets that shape their identity. Identities are dynamic, constantly changing based on surroundings and social context (Weaver, 2001). Participant 4 wanted her identity to reflect the type of human she strives to be:

P4: I just identify myself as a person who wants to live always in right relationships to the world around me... And in that identity, that's who I become as a mother, that's who I become as a friend, that's who I become as a grandmother... that's who I become as an employer, as a worker at the university, all of that at my core identity is neither female or male, it's just who I am, and how I navigate the journey that I'm on.

Many participants wanted to improve life for the next generation by educating and building meaningful relationships. Participant 7 saw himself as a collaborator enabling good relationships:

P7: I am working towards binding and bringing people together on both sides.

For Participant 10, it is challenging people's views that is important:

P10: I very much enjoying stirring pots, breaking down stereotypes and changing what people view as the norm.

In the case of Participant 9, she strives to create a better future for all Indigenous peoples:

P9: I'm a helper...before you can help someone you need to help yourself...

There are many people that paved the way, and I'm just following the road, and I believe I'm paving somebody else's way. I believe I am here to help people, and possibly educate and pass on my knowledge to my children and my grandchildren and other's children.

Finally, for Participants 5 and 6, reclamation of identity was interwoven with a sense of sovereignty and self-determination. Participant 5 reclaims her multiple identifications proudly:

P5: After going back home I would also identify myself as being Mushkegowuk... Moose Cree.... Proud to be an Islander and, umm, yeah... not shamed anymore... very proud, our people are doing wonderful things.

Participant 6 shared how he reclaimed his sense of self-determination and sovereignty:

P6: My identity would probably be best described as someone who is asserting nationhood, as opposed to, I don't know... being a crown ward.

In summary, all participants highlighted that having a sense of one's Indigeneity can be a very empowering experience. Whether it was through lived experiences or declaration of their reclaimed identity, participants cited a range of empowering sources that assisted in the maintenance and strength of their Indigenous identities.

The following section discusses the findings and the outcomes of the research as they relate to conceptualizations of Indigenous identity.

## **Discussion**

As well as the themes that emerged from the participants' stories, the Sharing Circle approach also helped to create a space for Indigenous worldviews to be privileged within this research. Participants were enthusiastic about the purpose and methodology of

an Indigenous research approach and seemed excited to be part of the process. This participant expressed her excitement:

Look at where the world is today...in the last 20 years there has been a dramatic move forward... not just sitting here and talking about your research on Indigenous people. Where would we have done that 20 years ago? P10

Indigenous methodologies are slowly being welcomed into educational establishments; however, ethics approval continues to be challenging, at many institutions (Baskin, 2016).

With regard to the content of the Sharing Circles, three themes emerged as most vital to the discussion of conceptualizing Indigeneity: Culture, Colonization, and Self-Determined Identities. Within each of these, participants expressed a variety of ways in which they maintained, expressed and reclaimed their Indigeneity. The following discusses the interplay of these themes.

Culture for the participants is described under a wide variety of themes. It is discussed as knowledge that is traditional or ancestral, and transmitted inter-generationally. Concepts like land, language, Bimaadiziwin, and community were all vital to how participants live their culture, and in turn assert and transmit their Indigenous identity (Corntassel, 2010; Weaver, 2001).

In terms of traditional teachings, the majority of information shared around aspects of Bimaadiziwin and living in a good way demonstrated concepts of interconnectivity and an enormous amount of cultural resilience for having retained this knowledge (Smith, 1999). These teachings were in many forms, but all had the same intent: to have good relationships with themselves, with others and with nature. Participants are looking to improve their worlds, and to be grateful for the path they have

walked (Nabigon et al., 1999). These teachings are directly linked to the importance of community. Most notable were the complex relationships and roles of community in the development of one's identity (TRCC, 2015). Participants attributed an enormous amount of importance to the aspects of community, helping one another, and the role of community members in the transmission of cultural knowledge, as well as teachings on identity. This demonstrates that identity is not a concept independent from the community – community teaches and sustains identity, but also develops a sense of belonging.

Although we must not undervalue language, land, and multiple types of knowledge, the participants noted that community was the best avenue for making cultural knowledge accessible to learners.

Colonial impact, much like culture, comes in a multitude of forms. Some forms of colonization are seen through loss of land, language, and knowledge, while others attributed to superimposed and false identities (de Leeuw et al., 2010; Godlewska et al., 2010). Both are extremely hazardous and damaging to culture, transmission methods, and formation of healthy Indigenous identities (Poudrier & Mac-Lean, 2008; Osborne & Taylor, 2010).

A particularly noteworthy aspect of colonization is that of child displacement. Participants agreed that residential schools caused an assortment of problems for Indigenous peoples, including, but not limited to, loss of culture, family structure, and identity. Damage to family structure is of particular importance here because it relates to knowledge transmission (TRCC, 2015; TVO, 2016). The dismantling of the family structure in the residential school era was repeated with the child welfare system through

the above-average rates of child removal (TRCC, 2015). After several generations underwent this process, the inter-generational effects became compounded and symptoms of family structure degradation embedded themselves in survivors and their descendants (TRCC, 2015). Family structure breakdown also includes a community aspect. Through displacement policies, children were removed from their parents, and communities lost their unity and cohesive knowledge systems (TRCC, 2015). This is particularly distressing since all the participants explicitly stated the importance of community in self-defining an Indigenous identity.

A second aspect of colonization is the negative representations portrayed by mainstream society. Participants believe that their Indigenous identity was stigmatized and marginalized by people inside and outside their own culture. Stereotypes, labelling, and othering are classic methods of oppression (Pendersen & Barlow, 2008). Participants shared that internalizing these false or negative representations fostered feelings of shame and embarrassment towards their own Indigeneity. Negative internalized identities leads to unhealthy identities and communities (Cote-Meek, 2014; Usborne & Taylor, 2009; Weaver, 2001). As stated previously, colonization must be acknowledged as impacting the formation of identity, but should not be the only point of reference. Participants recognized the harm of colonization, but did not feel that it dictated their identity. Self-identifying and asserting one's own identity was of much greater importance and meaning for this group of participants.

Self-determined identity is all about empowerment. Although participants spoke of negative or difficult topics, their resistance to and resilience in spite of oppressive structures was apparent throughout the Sharing Circles. As supported by Alfred and

Corntassel (2005) and others, colonial forces can trigger fierce resistance and cultural strengthening (Weaver, 2001).

Participants generally expressed their identity through combinations of resistance and resilience, but most impactful was the assertion of their reclaimed identity. As stated by Smith (1999), resistance and resilience are useful to “accentuate the degree to which indigenous peoples and communities have retained cultural and spiritual values and authenticity in resisting colonialism” (Smith, 1999, p. 146). The journey of reframing and reclaiming their Indigeneity was an important aspect for the participants.

Reclaiming participants’ identity was an empowering process by which individuals determined how they identify. Reflective of Smith’s (1999) concepts of reframing, Sharing Circles supported participants in reframing their identity as they asserted their Indigeneity on multiple levels. This is consistent with Weaver’s (2001) examination of identity, which comprises the self, community, and external identification. Participants would employ a combination of individual and community concepts on which their identities were built. In addition, external radicalized identifications were noted as having had a significant impact on the formulation of their self-identities.

Other participants examined the reclamation of identity through culture, belonging to a social collective, and elements of self that make up a larger identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Individuals identified as helpers, pot-stirrers, artists, teachers, and humans. Regardless of how people chose to reclaim their identity, the researcher noted pride, strength, and resilience in how people self-determined. As reported by many participants, and as substantiated by Alfred and Corntassel (2005), there are no moulds to

capture Indigeneity. Identity remains a living entity and can only be dictated by that individual.

Lastly, the notion of self-identification promotes identities that are contextual, regional, diverse, complex, and dynamic. When individuals are supported to self-determine their identity, they become aware of the context of their surroundings, teachings, beliefs and values. Moreover, the nuances of how these participants self-identify become understood as described by themselves rather than by colonial discourse. Above all else for these participants, identity is about individuals reclaiming power by asserting their own views of Indigeneity.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to this research that are important to highlight. Due to the cultural differences within Indigenous populations, the significance of specific values and traits will vary depending on the participants and the area. Therefore it is necessary to recognize the regional nature of the research, and that validation of the data will be required to broaden the scope of any measure developed from these findings.

Secondly, although this research used a community participation approach combined with an Indigenous-based approach, the use of self-selected key informants could be critiqued as privileging certain individuals' knowledge, rather than allowing the community as a whole to advise on the research (Smith, 1999). Moreover, given the location of the research, it is likely impossible to have a representative sample of the community, or to have the community as a whole participate in the research.



Thirdly, it is important to note that the research took place on a university campus and that all participants were linked to this institution. The participants were students, faculty or staff of Laurentian University, but were from a variety of communities, First Nations and cities in Canada. Due to the sensitive nature of identity as a topic, self-selection of participants could be critiqued, as people who chose to participate, are more likely have a strong sense of self. As a consequence, individuals who do not have a strong sense of identity are not likely to participate and therefore would not have an opportunity to inform identity research. The group was heterogeneous; however, it is unknown whether the group was representative of Laurentian University's overall Indigenous population.

Finally, as this is a graduate level thesis, the scope of the research was restricted geographically. However, if a more comprehensive understanding of Indigenous identity in the Greater Sudbury area is to be attained, more resources and time would be needed.

### **Future Research**

The intent of the research was to collect qualitative information on how Indigenous people at the Laurentian University campus identify, express, and live their Indigeneity. When considering the sample size and scope of the research questions, the purpose of the research was met. Further research on the topic could include a larger sample size, and diversifying methods of recruitment to continue information gathering on Indigeneity. Increasing the sampling size and geographic area of data collection would be the next logical step to the ongoing understanding of Indigeneity on campus.

## **Conclusion**

Indigeneity, like all other facets of identity, should always be viewed through a contextual lens that takes into account individual differences as well as social, political, and cultural circumstances. Self-determined identities are both a source of empowerment and a frame for understanding resilience. For the research participants, identity was an innate part of themselves, continuously changing and evolving. Although we can accept that all people will identify in entirely unique ways, we must acknowledge that identity formation is in part regionally directed, meaning that certain knowledge, teachings, languages, or traditions will vary from region to region. Recognizing this, regionalism is a necessary step in creating a dialogue of Indigenous distinctiveness and connectedness.

When discussing reclamation, it becomes so much more than simple recognition, affiliation, or even identity. It becomes about reclaiming the right to determine one's self and how one engages in the journey of Bimaadiziwin. This concept is deeply linked to self-determination in all forms. Participants were inspirational in their undeniable assertions of their Indigeneity. Their proclamations recognized the importance of diversity and contextual identities, as well as the multifaceted nature of Indigeneity in a contemporary timeframe. Embracing and supporting diverse Indigenous identities can only nurture and promote healthy individuals, communities, and society.

This research has had an extraordinary impact on my life. It has influenced my perceptions as a researcher, lifelong learner and as a change maker. Most of all, doing this research in collaboration with a fantastic group of participants, with the support of my supervisors and colleagues, has supported me as I continued to understand the

complexities of my own identity. It is now my responsibility, to continue with the gifts provided within this research and continue to make positive change for the betterment of this world.

I resolutely believe that respect for diversity is a fundamental pillar in the eradication of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance. There is no excuse for evading the responsibility of finding the most suitable path towards the elimination of any expression of discrimination against Indigenous peoples.

Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Nobel Laureate

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## APPENDIX A

### Letter of Invitation

#### **Reframing Indigeneity: Community Participation to inform the development of an Indigenous Identity Measure**

Émilie Bourgeault-Tassé  
Laurentian University,  
Sudbury, Ontario

We are interesting in discussing how you define, express and live your Indigenous Identity. The purpose of the research is to inform the construction of an Indigenous Identity Measure (IIM) by integrating community participation to understand how individual perceive their own Identity.

We are seeking participants who identify as First-Nation, Metis, Inuit, Indigenous and who work or study on the Laurentian Campus. Information will be gathered through the use of a brief *Biographical Description of Self and Sharing Circles* to identify important themes. Participants will be asked to describe their experiences surrounding concepts of Indigeneity to help inform the development of an Identity measure.

Participation is always voluntary and individual have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. In the case of anxiety or emotional distress, counselling resources and services will be made available. Individuals should feel safe and comfortable during the research process.

I would be grateful to hear from knowledgeable individuals who wish to share their experiences and wisdom about their sense of self and sense of Indigeneity.

Thank you for your consideration

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions:

Émilie Bourgeault-Tassé  
B.A., M.I.R (c)  
[ex\\_bourgeaulttasse@laurentian.ca](mailto:ex_bourgeaulttasse@laurentian.ca)  
705-675-1151 ext. 5066



## APPENDIX B

### Consent Form

#### **Reframing Indigeneity: Community Participation to inform the development of an Indigenous Identity Measure**

Émilie Bourgeault-Tassé  
Laurentian University,

Thank you for choosing to participate in this research. Your role as a participant includes: 1) completion of a *Biographical Description of Self*; and 2) participation in an audio-recorded *Sharing Circle* to discuss your Indigenous Identity or Indigeneity.

Confidentiality of personal information will be maintained where possible, however due to the nature of Sharing Circles, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed by the researcher. In addition, information gathered will be held in trust by the researcher to be used in the present context and also as secondary data in future research dealing with Indigenous Identity in the Greater Sudbury area. This Consent Form allows the researcher to use the information given by you in the *Biographical Description of Self* and *Sharing Circles* for the purpose of this research.

If you have any questions please contact:

Émilie Bourgeault-Tassé, Laurentian University

Email: [ex\\_bourgeaulttasse@laurentian.ca](mailto:ex_bourgeaulttasse@laurentian.ca) or by phone 705-675-1151\*5066

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705-675-1151 ext. 3429

Dr. Joël Dickinson  
[jdickinson@laurentian.ca](mailto:jdickinson@laurentian.ca)  
705-675-1151 ext. 4297

If you have any questions concerning the ethical conduct of this research, please contact:

Research Ethics Office

Laurentian University,

Sudbury Ontario

Telephone: 705-675-1151 \* 3213 /\* 2436

Toll Free: 1-800-461-4030

Email: [ethics@laurentian.ca](mailto:ethics@laurentian.ca)

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I agree to participate in this study and have received a copy of this Consent Form

-----  
Print Name

-----  
Contact information

-----  
Participant's Signature

-----  
Date

☐ Yes, I would like to receive a research summary of the findings

## APPENDIX C

## Biographical Description of Self

## Reframing Indigeneity: Community Participation to inform the development of an Indigenous Identity Measure

Émilie Bourgeault-Tassé  
Laurentian University,  
Sudbury, Ontario

Please complete as many of the questions as you feel comfortable

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Alternative name for research (pseudonym): \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your families' ancestry: \_\_\_\_\_

How do you identify yourself: \_\_\_\_\_

Maternal Language: \_\_\_\_\_

**In your own words, please describe your own identity:**

[illegible]

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Sharing Circle and Protocol**

#### **Reframing Indigeneity: Community Participation to inform the development of an Indigenous Identity Measure**

Émilie Bourgeault-Tassé  
Laurentian University,  
Sudbury, Ontario

In this context the Sharing Circle will be used as a process of data collection, where individuals will be audio-recorded while they share their knowledge of Indigenous identity based on a questions posed by the facilitator/researcher. Prior to commencement, protocols of the Circle like respect and confidentiality, will be explained by the facilitator. In a clockwise fashion each individual will have an opportunity to respond or pass. Once an individual has either finished speaking or passed, the following participant will be provided the same opportunity to either respond or pass. This process will continue until all members of the Circle have replied to each of the five questions. This process should take 1-3 hours depending on how much each individual wishes to share. Data collected from these Sharing Circles will be used for the purpose of this research, and all identifying materials will be destroyed upon completion of thesis defence. Only non-identifying materials will be retained by the lead researcher for publications and presentations related to thesis topic. After the Sharing Circles are complete, the participants will be thanked with a small gift, and invited to eat and to socialize with the group.

### Protocols of the Circle:

- This Sharing Circle will be used to share your experiences, and knowledge about your own understanding of Indigenous identity.
- Sharing Circles are used to promote active listening, patience, self-expression, trust and most of all respect (Stevenson, 1999).
- Sharing circles recognize the Creator and our Ancestors as part of the process (Nabigon et. al., 1999; Stevenson, 1999).
- Sharing circles provide a safe environment to share, without interruption, or judgement (Lavallée, 2009; Restoule, 2006; Stevenson, 1999)
- To ensure confidentiality of the Sharing Circle, which is based on trust and respect; we ask all participants to **respect that what is said in the circle, stays in the circle.**

### Sharing Circle Questions

1. Who has taught you the most about your identity?
  - Is Identity/Indigeneity something that was discussed with you growing up?
2. To you, what does it mean to be Indigenous?
  - What are some important values?
3. Has colonization impacted your Indigeneity?
  - If so, how?
4. How do you define your Identity?
  - Who are you?
5. Any Concluding remarks?